

## **FROM NEW YORK TO PARIS AND BACK AGAIN: AN ARTIST'S LIFE**

**Mirella Shapiro, Nat Shapiro's wife of 57 years, talks about life with her artist husband. Her answers are based on a series of conversations in 2022 and her memoir essays.**

### **When and where did you and Nat meet?**

I emigrated to New York with my sister at the end of 1946 after spending the war years in Tangier. My family had left Italy when Mussolini enacted anti-Semitic laws and my father lost his position as head surgeon of a municipal hospital. My sister and I lived in a boarding house in New York City, and I befriended a young woman from Oklahoma who was studying voice. Her boyfriend shared an apartment with Nat on 92nd Street. We would all go to the Rockaway or Jones beaches together.

Then Nat came to my birthday party, and we all went dancing at Tavern-On-The-Green, which back then was just an outdoor café with a dance floor. Nat and I danced all night and then he said, "I'll call you one of these days." We started having lunch together as our offices were quite close. He pretended he wasn't interested in a serious relationship, but we had a big attraction to each other.

### **Did you and Nat get married soon after?**

When I had left Tangier for New York, my father came to see us off at the boat and said, "I'll never see you again." I was so upset about this that as soon as I started working, I ate apples for lunch for almost a whole year, to save enough money for a ticket back to Tangier for the summer.

Nat came to see me off at the pier, but because he was so aloof, I expected he would forget all about me. Instead, he started writing letters: it was one, two, three letters a week. And one day his letter said: "I'm coming to Tangier for one week vacation."

So, I said, "Whoa. That's not possible." I wrote back and told him: "Look, Tangier is a small town. They all know me. They all know my father, my mother. And if you come, you are committing yourself. So, think it over." And he wrote back, "I don't have to think it over. I want to marry you." So, he proposed by letter. He took all his savings to buy a plane ticket and we got married in Tangier. That was 1948. The noncommittal man ended up married for 57 years.

### **Had Nat already conveyed to you that his life's passion was his art by then?**

Oh, absolutely. When I met him, he was going to The Art Students League. At that time, it was the best art school in New York. For the rest of my life, I have been surrounded by Nat's paintings and sculptures. Our apartments were a revolving gallery. As soon as Nat finished a painting, he would bring it home and hang it, so that he could study it and decide if it was finished or not, if it needed corrections, if he liked it or not.

### **What was your experience with the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover?**

This was one of the most traumatizing events in my life. At that time in the 1950s, we were living in a garden apartment in New Jersey, where our neighbors were mostly young couples

with little children. We all knew each other; we were all friends. It was then that I was called to the immigration office as I was seeking American citizenship.

I had studied for the citizenship test, and I thought I knew everything by heart. While the officer was out of the room, I saw a paper on his desk that caught my attention, and I started reading it upside-down. A friend and neighbor had reported to the FBI that Nat was a communist and that we had communist cell meetings in our apartment. It was the McCarthy era and accusing someone of being a communist was serious. Of course, it was ludicrous.

Later, I was called in by the FBI and the agent just kept drilling me, "Are you a communist? Is your husband a communist? Do you have friends who are communists?" They went to my workplace, and I lost that job because of it. It took me seven years to get my citizenship, when it should have been three.

In 1990, I used the Freedom of Information Act to get the FBI file and there are memos from J. Edgar Hoover. He was furious that the confidential informant's name had leaked out, while he didn't seem very worried that the Shapiros may be a threat to the security of the USA. We were later exonerated, as they could not find any incriminating evidence of us being communists.

### **Did you ever find out why you were reported?**

Nat was very open about his ideas and did not hide the fact that he was against the Korean War. He was, I would say, a liberal, but he never joined any party. His views may have upset the neighbor, but I also think it was because we had a New Year's Eve party where we included our Black friends, one of whom was Nat's best friend at the time. It upset people.

### **How did you end up in Europe?**

One day in 1962, Nat said, "I want to see what's happening in Europe." We decided that he should go alone to "inspect the terrain," while I remained in Chicago with the two children, waiting to hear whether we should follow him or not. He went by ship to Naples, then drove to Milano, and then to Nice and finally to Paris. All along his pilgrimage he took many photos from which, later on, he made paintings catching the mood and particularity of that monument or that landscape. Before leaving, he'd gotten a commission from the Lions Club for pen and ink sketches of Nice and that paid for his expenses.

Eventually I joined him with the kids. How would we survive? How would the children react to such a change of culture, language, school? We did not dwell on all these important problems. We just got on a ship and went.

### **What was it like starting over in France?**

We stayed in a house near Nice at first because even 16 years after the end of WWII, it was very difficult to find lodging in Paris. We wanted a place with a telephone, and you had to wait three years to get a telephone in Paris in those days. We were poor for the first years because Nat had a tough time finding a job. He didn't know the language, although he later became fluent. Then he started working for a magazine. He was paid very poorly, but it was an income. We saved on everything and were frugal. I made the kids' clothes.

**Did he have a studio at that point?**

No, no, no. He just bought a board, leaned it against some furniture, and used that make-shift drawing-table to work on. He did the sculpture, *The King*, from a tree trunk he found in the garden. He just started chipping away until he got the sculpture, which he had never done in his life. He didn't even have the tools. He just had a hammer and a chisel and with that he succeeded in creating an amazingly beautiful sculpture.

**How did Nat approach his work as an artist? What fueled him?**

It's just something that you want to do, you feel you have to express yourself one way or the other. It was part of his life structure, something he had to do. He was disciplined and went to his studio every day and when he came home in the late afternoon he'd say, "Oh, I didn't do anything today. I couldn't think of anything." And then another day he would say, "Oh, I just did something. Come."

**How did he view the process?**

He always said, "It's work. It's work. You think it's just fun? No, it's work." He had to think about it, organize it and make sketches, put it down on a canvas or paper and then look at it and correct it, or change it, or destroy it or whatever. It was mental work.

**Was there a particular work he was especially proud of?**

Every time he started in a new direction, he liked that. He was very, very proud of the big canvas he did after we returned to live in New York, called *Universe*. It takes up a whole wall and he worked on a ladder to paint it. He wanted it to hang in a large space to allow, in his words, "the mind to expand to its dimensions." It is certainly one of his best, if not the best piece he has created.